

'Arrkanala Lyilhitjika'

History

There is in the Desert heart of Australia a largely unknown story of the 120-year old strong and resilient choral heritage that remote Indigenous communities enjoy. It is a significant Australian story of Church Choirs, Men's choirs, mixed choirs, national Eisteddfods, interstate choral tours, Choir Festivals and an iconic cantata performed at the Sydney Opera House. These communities have incorporated this 'new' form of singing into their centuries-old tradition of 'song' and 'ceremony' practiced in Western Arrarnta and Pitjantjatjara societies. This choral practice has played a major role in the preservation of their languages and culture and the propagation of literacy. It has also reinforced identity, and connection to country.

This choral history boasts an impressive compendium of sacred music: original hymnody in the Western Arrarnta and Pitjantjatjara chanting tradition and translations into those languages of sacred poetry, some of which dates back to 4th Century Greek. It is a tradition bounded by ancient languages, baroque musical arrangements and Lutheran hymnic poetry: a unique musical conjunction without peer anywhere in the world! Since 2006, Morris Stuart, a conductor and musical director, has been conducting a choral skill-building program with women's choirs from these desert communities to help rebuild this tradition at a time when it was almost extinct due to the ageing and death of its proponents and participants. This program has seen the steady rebirth of this story, up-skilling its participants, and through performance opportunities, the gradual unveiling of the story to the public.

The 'BOOMERANG' tour

Performance events in Alice Springs, South Australia and Darwin and also through the annual Desert Song Festival, have enabled these choirs to hone and develop their skill to the point where In June 2015, at the invitation of the Bavarian Mission, 35 women spanning 3 generations and 6 remote communities comprising the combined 'Central Australian Aboriginal Women's Choir' will undertake a three-week performance tour of Germany. This tour represents a historic full circle moment as they take back to Germany the hymns that were given to their forebears

by the Lutheran missionaries but now offered back to Germany in the Western Arrarnta and Pitjantjatjara languages.

The flagship performance piece of this tour will be 'Arrkanala Lyilhitjika' (Western Arrarnta -The Joy of Singing), a new work - a 75-minute choral fantasia of sacred music and other songs in 5 languages: Western Arrarnta, Pitjantjatjara, German, Yorta Yorta and English. The choral presentation will be accompanied by multi-arts elements that will illustrate and illuminate this iconic story. They will comprise selections from archival material, interviews, story telling, images of country, soundscapes and contemporary moving images and narration, to give context to the story. The work will be a conversation between their longstanding choral heritage and recent collaborations with non-Indigenous Central Australian choirs and particularly with the internationally renowned Soweto Gospel Choir through performances in 2011 and 2014 in Alice Springs and Darwin. The choral work will illustrate that the story is no longer one they inherited, but is now one that is unquestionably theirs.

A small film crew will accompany the touring party to capture this experience to be archived in the communities, in Alice Springs and also in the National Archives for the benefit of contemporaries and succeeding generations. The Film will portray the women leaving Central Australia for Germany. 'Fly on the wall events', will interweave with the personal stories of some of the key women in the choir showing how choral singing and their faith have helped them overcome some big tragedies in their lives, heavily shaping who they are. This will give viewers an intimate insight into who these remarkable women are, why they do what they do, what's at stake and the incredible strength and resilience they possess, to be where they are today.

The film will explore how the codification of language and translation of hymns through a remarkable collaboration between Western Arrarnta and Pitjantjatjara people and the German mission pioneers also preserved language and fortuitously supported traditional culture. It will show how these women have melded with great success, both aspects of who they are: their traditional culture and their Christianity, gaining great strength from seemingly opposing parts of their identity. It is a paradox and a reality that isn't spoken about much in Australian society.

The Kirchentag Festival performances will be captured. Scenes of the choirs returning to Australia and to their remote communities will accompany closing reflections from the women and from Morris on the tour, their experiences, their sense of pride and their hopes for continuing this tradition and passing it on to the next generation.

In a performance landscape within Indigenous music that is dominated by the presence of men, this story represents an unheralded aspect of contemporary Australian Indigenous music and musicianship and is a testament to the resilience of Indigenous women in the Central Desert and the preservation and strengthening of their identity, languages and culture through song.

‘Arrkanala Lyilhitjika’ is a celebration of cultural survival and the universality of personal human experiences that brings the unlikeliest of people together to achieve great things. It is ultimately a story of triumph and dignity against the odds and the recognition of the power of the human spirit and voice. Literally!